

Message Text

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ACTION DHA-02

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INFO USMISSION GENEVA

USUN NEW YORK 1699

AMCONGEN HONG KONG

AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

AMEMBASSY TOKYO

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY MANILA

AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMCONSUL SONGKHLA

AMCONSUL UDORN

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 25274

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SREF, TH, CB, VS

SUBJECT: INDOCHINESE BOAT CASES

REF: A) STATE 220624 B) BANGKOK 24564

SUMMARY: LOCAL RTG OFFICIALS PUSH BOATLOAD OF RECENTLY
ARRIVED REFUGEES INTO MALAYSIAN WATERS, WHILE OTHER OFFICIALS
ACCEPT NEW BOATLOADS. END SUMMARY:

1. RTC ATTITUDE TOWARD INDOCHINESE REFUGEES ARRIVING BY
BOAT HAS BEEN THE MOST LIBERAL IN THE AREA SINCE THE CHANGE
OF GOVERNMENT IN THE THREE INDOCHINA COUNTRIES. THAILAND
HAS AT LEAST 80,000 INDOCHINESE REFUGEES ON HAND AT PRESENT
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AND HAS EXPRESSED OPPOSITION TO RETURNING REFUGEES TO THEIR

HOMES. HOWEVER, THERE HAS BEEN TALK IN THE PAST OF SOME BOATS BEING PUSHED AWAY AND, ON SEPTEMBER 6, OUR CONSUL IN SONGKHLA AND VISITING EMBOFFS WITNESSED AND WERE UNABLE TO HALT ONE SUCH FORCED DEPARTURE. THE BOAT IN QUESTION WAS TOWED SOUTH BY THE THAI NAVY TO THE VICINITY OF THE MALAYSIAN BORDER AND CAST ADRIFT THERE.

2. SONGKHLA HAS BEEN SERVING AS TEMPORARY GATHERING POINT FOR VIETNAMESE REFUGEES ARRIVING IN SOUTHERN THAILAND FOR SOME TIME. ON AUGUST 30 BOATLOAD OF 35 CAMBODIAN REFUGEES (33 SINO-CAMBODIANS, 2 ETHNIC KHMERS) ARRIVED THERE FROM VIET-NAM AFTER HAVING LANDED AT NEXT MAJOR CITY TO THE SOUTH, PATTANI, AND WAS FORCED TO LEAVE THERE. AT SONGKHLA, THEY PULLED UP NEXT TO A LINE OF VIETNAMESE BOATS ALREADY ON HAND AND WERE PLACED IN TEMPORARY SHELTER SEVERAL FEET FROM VIETNAMESE REFUGEE ENCLAVE, WITHOUT PROBLEM.

3. FOR REASONS STILL UNCLEAR, SONGKHLA GOVERNOR CHARAS SITTIPONG DECIDED SEPTEMBER 5 THAT CAMBODIANS MUST LEAVE, DESPITE FACT THAT THAI WERE ADVISED THAT UNHCR AND FRENCH EMBOFFS WERE ARRIVING SEPTEMBER 9 TO INTERVIEW NEW ARRIVALS IN ANTICIPATION OF FUTURE PLACEMENT IN OTHER COUNTRIES. CONSUL SONGKHLA ATTEMPTED TO REVERSE DECISION DURING DINNER SEPTEMBER 5 IN HONOR OF VISIT OF FOREIGN MINISTER PHICHAI RATTAKUN AND INTERIOR DEPUTY UNDERSECRETARY DAMRONG SUNTHORN SARATHORN BUT GOVERNOR CHARAS HAD ALREADY DONE HIS FOOTWORK, TELLING THE BANGKOK OFFICIALS THAT STANDING ORDERS FROM MOR TO TURN AWAY BOATS WOULD BE IMPLEMENTED IN CASE OF CAMBODIANS. VISITING THAI OFFICIAL FROM BANGKOK CONCURRED, IN EFFECT, AND TINY BOAT WAS FORCED TO DEPART FOLLOWING DAY. AT THE SCENE, SONGKHLA VICE GOVERNOR BOONAK SAISAWONG TOLD CONSUL THAT CAMBODIANS COULD NOT REMAIN BECAUSE THAI FEARED FRICTIONS BETWEEN CAMBODIANS AND VIETNAMESE BUT WOULD PROBABLY BE SENT NORTH, AND THAT THERE WAS NO CHANGE IN SONGKHLA ATTITUDE TOWARD RECEIVING VIETNAMESE. ROYAL THAI NAVY INITIALLY TOWED BOAT NORTHWARD BUT THEN, ON SEPTEMBER 7, TOWED IT SOUTHWARD INTO MALAYSIAN WATERS. THERE HAS BEEN NO NEWS OF FATE OF BOAT SINCE THEN.

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4. UNHCR INTERCEDED IMMEDIATELY IN BANGKOK AND WAS TOLD THAT REFUGEES SIMPLY REQUESTED ASSISTANCE IN ORDER THAT THEY COULD PROCEED TO SINGAPORE. THIS WAS DEFINITELY NOT THE CASE, AS THE REFUGEES WERE WELL AWARE THAT THEIR CHANCES OF BEING ACCEPTED IN EITHER SINGAPORE OR MALAYSIA WERE NIL. UNHCR GENEVA HAS INSTRUCTED ITS BANGKOK OFFICE TO PUSH THE THAI HARD ON THIS ISSUE, AND UNHCR KUALA

LUMPUR HAS BEEN INFORMED TO TRY TO LOOK OUT FOR THE EX-PELLED CAMBODIANS. WE HAVE REPEATED TO EMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE CASE BY SEPTTEL.

5. BALANCING OFF ABOVE SONGKHLA INCIDENT IS FACT THAT FORTY-TWO VIETNAMESE REFUGEES ARRIVED AT SAMUT PRAKAN NEAR BANGKOK ON TWO BOATS SEPTEMBER 8 AND ARE BEING ALLOWED TO REMAIN THERE. BOTH CASES SERVE TO ILLUSTRATE EXTENT OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES' AUTONOMY IN SUCH A SITUATION. THEY HAVE AUTHORITY TO SEND BOATS OFF IF THEY DESIRE--AND WE ARE FORTUNATE IN KNOWING ABOUT SONGKHLA CASE SIMPLY BECAUSE WE HAVE A CONSULAE THERE--OR MAY ALLOW THEM TO REMAIN, WHICH IS THE USUAL PRACTICE. THEY SHOW THAT RTG IS FAR FROM UNIFIED OVER WISHING TO CONTINUE ITS HUMANITARIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD REFUGEES. (UNHCR BELIEVES THAT HFA IS FAVORABLY DISPOSED TOWARD THE PRINCIPLE OF FIRST ASYLUM AND MUCH OF THE MOI AND NAVY ARE OPPOSED.) RECENT CONTROVERSY INSIDE THAILAND ABOUT WHAT TO DO WITH THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES STILL HERE AFTER TWO OR THREE DECADES--WE HAVE RECENTLY RECEIVED APPEAL SENT BY AN MP TO SEVERAL EMBASSIES REQUESTING THAT RECIPIENTS ASK THE SRV O TAKE THEM ALL BACK--ONLY SERVES TO MAKE RTG POSITION ON ISSUE MORE DIFFICULT.

6. AS WE PRESUME OTHER POSTS IN THE AREA ARE DOING, EMBASSY HAS COMMENCED BRIEFINGS OF NEWSMEN ON SUBJECT OF BOAT CASES PER REF A, AND UNHCR OFFICIAL HAS SUGGESTED THAT WE ADVISE JOURNALISTS ALSO TO STOP BY THAT OFFICE. WE ARE STILL NOT CERTAIN HOW WIDESPREAD INTEREST OF NEWSMEN IS GOING TO BE AND, AGAIN, WISH TO AVOID HAVING THEM FOCUS ONLY ON UNFAVORABLE ASPECTS OF THAI HANDLING OF SITUATION, ALTHOUGH WE HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO INTENTION OF HIDING RECENT SONGKHLA ACTION. BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT

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BACKGROUNDING PRESS CAN TONLY BE ONE ELEMENT IN OBTAINING INTERNATIONALIZATION OF PROBLEM, EMBASSY PROPOSED THAT SECRETARY INCLUDE DISCUSSION OF IT IN HIS UNGA SPEECH (REF B). WE WOULD APPRECIATE HAVING DEPARTMENT'S REACTION TO THIS SUGGESTION.

7. FINALLY, ONE UNHCR OFFICIAL HAS TOLD US THAT HE WONDERS WHETHER ONE REASON FOR THAI DELAY IN RESPONDING TO HIGH COMMISSIONER'S BOAT CASE APPEAL MAY BE THAT EVERYONE IS WAITING TO SEE WHAT U.S. REACTION WILL BE. OTHER COUNTRIES KNOW THAT EPP IS ESSENTIALLY OVER BUT THAT WE REMAIN INTERESTED IN INDOCHINESE REFUGEE PROBLEM, AND IN BOAT CASES IN PARTICULAR.

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